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# Negotiating Gender in Professional Soccer: An Analysis of Female Footballers in the United States

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## Abstract

Youth soccer is thriving in the United States but the country's professional soccer leagues over the past couple decades have had mixed results in terms of commercial viability with some leagues surviving (e.g., MLS) and others ceasing (e.g., WUSA). While scholars and practitioners may offer explanations regarding the reasons for the specific challenges facing women's professional soccer leagues, the present study looked at this subject by examining one group of stakeholders - female elite athletes - and the players' perceptions of gender in the USA professional soccer program. The findings of this qualitative analysis were concentrated into three interconnected themes. The first theme involved the participants' perceptions of role models and their socialization as soccer players. Media images and the invisibility of the female athlete formed the second theme. The third theme was the sexualization of elite female bodies and transgressions of compulsory heterosexuality boundaries. The analysis of the interviews revealed an interesting paradox of elite female athletes using gender to understand sports. The interviewed athletes used stereotypical notions of masculinity to increase their legitimacy as elite athletes, while at the same time devaluing the abilities of female coaches by using stereotypical notions of femininity. In addition to discussing the empirical results and interconnected themes, the implications of the findings are also detailed.

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**Key Words:** *Gender, identities, professional sport, USA soccer, symbolism, women's soccer.*

While football, basketball, baseball, and hockey are often called the "Big Four" in the United States (hereafter US), soccer is not far behind in the country's group of leading spectatorial and participatory sports (Di Lorenzo, 2013; Kelley & Carchia, 2013). At the elite level, the US women's national team has been a dominant force for years commencing with winning the inaugural Fédération Internationale de Football Association (hereafter FIFA) Women's World Cup in 1991. Over the past two decades the national team has secured victories in two World Cups and four Olympic Games while being ranked among the top five by FIFA's standards ("FIFA/Coca-Cola Women's World Ranking", 2013). Women's soccer in the US reached its peak during the 1999 World Cup, with a final that had tremendous numbers in terms of spectators (e.g., a sellout with over 90,000 fans) and television viewers (e.g., the 40-million-plus TV audience is still a record for the most-viewed event in the history of women's sports) (Kelly, 2013). The on-field success, spectator enthusiasm, TV viewership, publicity, commercial consumption (e.g., jersey purchases), and overall popularity of women's soccer at the turn of the century resulted in the establishment of a professional soccer league (e.g., Women's United Soccer Association [hereafter WUSA]).

While the US female soccer team appeared at this time to have succeeded in its struggle against invisibility (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003), the results at the professional level were short lived. The success of the national team has not translated into a sustainable professional women's soccer league. There have been upstart leagues or league incarnations with varying levels of sophistication and organization, but they have all folded over the intervening two decades. One of the most recent and popular leagues, Women's Professional Soccer (hereafter WPS), lasted three seasons before being dissolved in May of 2012 (Dure, 2012). A collection of eight teams formed the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) which faced skepticism and mixed results in its 2013 inaugural season (Botta, 2013). Overall, women's professional soccer in the US is promising but from a business perspective continues to struggle to find a foothold and sustainable growth in the domestic sport market. Such a business dynamic, in addition to the notion of gender itself as being dynamic, makes professional women's soccer in the US a rich field for gendered inquiries.

In an effort to provide more research on the experiences of professional female soccer players in the US, this study investigated four elite players' experiences and perceptions of gender relations in sport. The primary focus of this research was to examine the ways this unique group of elite athletes articulated, made use of, and negotiated gender identities within the US soccer context. To help contextualize the investigation, a brief review of relevant literature is presented below followed by a recent history of women's soccer in the US. Connell's (1987, 1995, and 2002) gender theory underpins the study's theoretical approach in relation to each participant's expressed ex-

periences in soccer. Although most Connellist analyses manifest the derogatory effect of patriarchy, the analysis below slightly shifts the perspective to highlight how the notion of patriarchy also becomes a legitimate means to convey a gendered agenda. The purpose of this study was to analytically understand how the athletes themselves understood and presented their soccer practice. For instance, were they progressively kicking forward or simply kicking around gender? The interviewees were given room before the analytic frame was applied. Data that illustrate the athletes' perceptions of gender dynamics are the main focus of this study and provide the structure for this manuscript.

## The Context of Women's Sport

Sport originated as a space for men to display their masculinity (e.g., Dunning, 1986), and research (e.g., Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013; Whiteside & Hardin, 2013) continues to emphasize that women in sport still find themselves as part of a stereotyped and marginalized minority. Although females have been gradually allowed to participate, history shows that females' entrance has been a struggle against gender stereotyping, and structural and organizational barriers (Hargreaves, 1994; Messner, 2002). The most visible sign of acceptance of women in the world of sport is their inclusion in the Olympic Games. Soccer for females was included in 1996 (the first Olympic soccer tournament for men was contested in the 1900 Summer Olympics), and the first gold was won by the Americans. Therefore, soccer is in many ways a new sport in a typical masculine domain.

Female athletes who participate in professional sports associated with muscularity and strength have often been analyzed as transgressing the boundaries of heterosexual femininity and masculinity (Holmlund, 1997; McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009). For example, when strong female athletes are depicted in the media, the power of their narratives as strong women is too often "trivialized" into that of the mother and beauty queen and consequently undermined (e.g., Creedon, 1998; Duncan, 1990; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008). Overall, media producers simply devote more time and resources to male sports (Cooky et al., 2013), resources that are paramount for a league to succeed or an athlete to earn money.

Past research on women's soccer from sociological and psychosocial approaches include investigations of gender differences and relative age effect (Vincent & Glasser, 2006), mediated constructions of contemporary females athletes (Shugart, 2003), intersections of gender, masculinity, social class, and sexuality (e.g., Cox & Thompson, 2000; Fasting & Pfister, 2000; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003), women's soccer and American exceptionalism

(Markovits & Hellerman, 2003), ethnic subcultures' construction of unique cultural identities through sport and integration into multicultural national identities (Van Rheezen, 2009), content media analysis and discourses (Christopherson, Janning, & McConnell, 2002), perceptions of stress and coping (Holt & Hogg, 2002; Kristiansen, Murphy, & Roberts, 2012), the challenge of dominant notions of "appropriate" female sports (Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, & Bunuel, 1999), and international feminism and soccer (Barlow, 2000). Despite this body of research on sport, gender, and media, more directed research is needed on the gender dynamics and experiences of professional female footballers (Liston, 2006) in a US sporting landscape that has faced challenges in building and sustaining women's professional soccer leagues.

## **The Context of Professional Soccer in the US**

Soccer has historically been a social space where traditional forms of masculinity are developed and practiced (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003). In terms of professional soccer the US has witnessed mixed business success and long-term viability. For instance, on the men's side, Major League Soccer (MLS) is approaching its second decade of existence and many would argue that the league is a successful and growing sport business enterprise. On the women's side, however, various professional leagues have started and stopped after facing various challenges in their attempts to stay commercially viable. The dramatic and well-publicized successes of the US women's team in the 1999 World Cup (Guest & Cox, 2009) led to the development of the aforementioned WUSA. This initially heralded women's professional soccer league began play in 2001 but suspended operations three years later - citing losses close to \$100 million. The WPS, also noted above, was a reincarnation of the defunct WUSA, commencing on March 29, 2009 (Mickle, 2009).

At the time of data collection, 2010, there were two top-notch women's professional leagues; the WPS, the flagship professional league, and a smaller competitor, the W-League (part of the United Soccer Leagues [USL]) (Kristiansen et al., 2012). The WPS featured five franchises located primarily on the eastern coast of the US: Atlanta, Boston, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and Western New York. The six teams located in Chicago, Florida, Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, St. Louis, and Washington opened and closed operations in the past three years (Mickle, 2010) and, unfortunately, this league lasted only three seasons (Dure, 2012). Research into US soccer players' perceptions of stress has revealed that stress associated with travel, draft status, and player contracts due to the structure and the struggle of the league were context-specific stressors for US soccer players

due to the limited resources available (Kristiansen et al., 2012). It is hoped that the new league starting up the spring of 2013, the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) administered by U.S. Soccer, will become a greater economic success.

## Gender Perspective

Connell's theoretical elaboration (Connell, 1987, 1995, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) of how societal gender relations inform structured gender orders provides the foundation for the present analysis of elite US women's soccer detailed below. This perspective assists in analyzing gender as containing a structural macro-dimension and gender relations as power relations "that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes" (Connell, 2000, p. 10). Inspired by Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Connell (1987, 2002) explored the dynamics of hierarchical gendered power. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), *hegemonic masculinity constitutes* the definition of masculinity that occupies the dominant position in *any* given pattern of gender relations; it is at the apex of the gender hierarchy, superior to other subordinated masculinities and all femininities. Hegemonic masculinity is a symbolic practice that contributes to the gendered division of labor and has traditionally been associated with heterosexuality, authority, strength, and physical toughness. In Connell's binary model we also find the notion of *emphasized femininity* (Connell, 1987, 1995). Emphasized femininity, as hegemonic masculinity's complementary and dichotomous opposition, is oriented to accommodate the interests and desires of men, and is often characterized by displays of sociability, receptiveness, and passivity, rather than technical competence. Emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity are, in relation to practiced gender and identity formation, conceived as idealized cultural symbols, rather than stable and individual characteristics or traits (Connell, 2002). In other words, very few women or men exclusively emphasize femininity or practice hegemonic masculinity; rather, individuals continually negotiate, reproduce, and recreate gendered practices through personal and collective gendered activities.

Significant to Connell's (2002) theory is the analytic focus on relations. An analysis of gender relations focuses on "ways that people, groups, and organizations are connected and divided" (Connell, 2002, p. 54). Gender relations do not need to be manifested in direct encounters between men and women as they can also be manifested in relations among men (Connell, 1995) and in markets and/or technologies (Connell, 2002). Connell further argued that gender relations are being constituted in everyday life and thus gender exists because we bring it into being - whether as reflective or routinized conduct (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell posited four main

structures in contemporary western sociocultural gender systems: power relations, production relations, emotional relations, and symbolic relations.

Firstly, *power relations* concern the oppressive structures of gender that have always been central to conceptions of patriarchy and the idea of men as "a dominant sex class" (Connell, 2002, p. 58). Researchers who have examined gender power relations have critiqued the traditional gender normative constructed and reinforced through media images of women as passive, trivial, and unimportant (Messner, 2002). Power relations manifest in the form of organized institutional power and diffuse discursive power; both forms of power are open to resistance and negotiation. Historically, both organized and diffuse power has been contested in sport, as seen in the US with the passage and adoption of Title IX. Connell underlined the conditions for resistance to institutional power and diffuse power change in concert with sociocultural and historical contexts.

Secondly, *production relations* refer to the sexual division of labor which varies greatly across cultural and historical periods (Connell, 2002). To a large extent, men and women continue to be differently located in the labor market. Connell theorized that sexual reproduction has implications for power relations and is tightly interwoven with relations of production. Even when accounting for industry variances, social nuances, and economic opportunities, the salaries for men and women doing the same jobs are still lopsided, with men receiving higher wages and having greater chances for advancement (Connell, 2002). In elite sport, previous research on economic gender inequity has outlined in detail that professional male athletes who participate in marquee sports earn significantly higher salaries than their female counterparts (Coakley, 2007; Messner, 2002).

Thirdly, *emotional relations* refer to emotional commitments and emotional attachments. Traditionally, emotional gender relations have been constructed around normative conceptions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. Emotional gender relations are interwoven into both power relations and production relations (Connell, 2002). Emotional gender relations are often idealized by the image of a nuclear family and a traditional division of labor. Emotional commitments may produce positive and/or negative feelings toward different objects and subjects, as both homophobia and mythologized masculinity are exemplified in many high profile sports. Connell (2002) argued that the major arena of emotional attachment in the Western world is sexuality and the structured relations (through the institution of marriage) between same and opposing genders that is ideologically based on love.

Fourthly, *symbolic relations* involve the dynamic practice of interpreting the gendered world. Connell (2002) argued that social institutions, such as sport, construct gendered meanings. Gendered symbolism operates in language (i.e., speech and writing), dress, makeup, gesture, photography, and film. Gender symbolism is influenced by larger social struggles for gender

equality, where gendered expressions evolve out of social attitudes toward gender equality. In practice, the four structures of gender relations constantly intermingle and interact, providing researchers a set of analytical tools to deconstruct the complexities of gender realities.

Connell's theoretical framework is widely used in the academic field of gender and sport research (Broch, 2011; Brookes, 2002; Messner, 2002; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008). Despite Connell's relational and symbolic possibilities, several research projects have not sought to empirically include several genders; they have only been symbolically present. This mechanistic tendency in the literature no doubt has its problems. This macro-approach to gender as structure, that reads off dichotomous structures and the hegemonic masculinity model in data, has been critiqued as producing numerous simplistic model analyses of gender in society (Messerschmidt, 2012) and sports (Kristiansen & Broch, 2013). The analysis below slightly shifts the Connellist perspective to also highlight how the notion of patriarchy becomes a legitimate means to convey a gendered agenda. Instead of an analysis that reduces persons, groups, and interviewees to manifestations of structure, the aim here is to produce an analysis that grants persons and groups creative leeway under macro-constraints.

## Method

The empirical investigation was conducted during the WPS 2010 pre-season by means of qualitative open-ended, in-depth interviews with female professional soccer players. The in-depth interview format was chosen because this approach allowed the participants to articulate their feelings about being female soccer players and their negotiation of gender relations (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The aim was to stimulate the production of narratives and to better understand the content and context of the gender constructions conveyed by the participants. Athletes' narratives were spontaneous and episodic, spread throughout the interview, together forming narrative wholes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), and later given a meaning during analysis. The interview guide consisted of three main sections. The first section pertained to the athletes' demographic backgrounds and backgrounds on their involvement in soccer. Gender socialization as a player was the focus of the second section of the interview guide. The third section involved questions about what it is like to be a female soccer player at the elite level. The interview guide was flexible to allow change in the order of questions, probe areas that arose, and explore the participants' perspectives and experiences.

Four female soccer players from one team in the WPS participated in the research study. The participants - Melissa, Grace, Yanique, and Wilma -



were elite players, and one of them was an international player that season. Their ages ranged from 18 (Wilma) to 37 (Melissa), with Yanique and Grace both in their twenties at 27 and 29, respectively. In addition to having European League experience, two subjects (Melissa and Grace) were also international gold medalists. Three participants (Melissa, Grace, and Yanique) had national team experience. Wilma was the only subject without an international gold medal, national team experience, and European League experience.

The first author conducted all four interviews. The locations for the interviews varied, held at the convenience of the participants in various informal locations, and the length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 80 minutes. At the beginning of the interviews participants were informed that the information they provided would remain confidential, and that they could terminate the interview at any time. In each of the four interviews, the athletes were actively engaged in discussing their perceptions of gender relations in professional soccer and their status as female soccer players in the US. Finally, the players were sent the transcripts of their interview and two participants provided additional comments after reading the transcript due to their interest in the topics covered.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Data analysis revealed that the interviewees had to negotiate gender in various aspects and phases of their athletic careers. The findings were concentrated into three interconnected themes: participants' perceptions of role models and their socialization as soccer players, media images and sexualization of elite female bodies, and the transgression of compulsory heterosexuality boundaries. Due to their interconnectedness, the themes are summed up in a section discussing how the athletes are "kicking around gender".

### **Female Role Models and the Negotiating of Emphasized Femininity**

The athletes in this study started playing soccer at a young age, with entrance into the world of soccer that developed through the support of each athlete's mother. Wilma explained that, "My mom just put me in soccer, just to be athletic, you know, you put your kids in sports... and this was what I liked the best, so she kept me in it". As the youngest interviewee, it might be that advances in gender equality influenced Wilma's choices that were different from her more experienced, older colleagues. This is also empirically demonstrated in Wilma's mention of sport and soccer celebrities such as Mia

Hamm and Brandi Chastain as elite role models who inspired her to excel in sports. She was a girl when the golden generation of women's national players rose to fame in 1999. Historically, sports stars have been perceived to have a responsibility as role models in both public discourses (Kristiansen & Lines, 2014) and within sport cultures (Giuliano, Turner, Lundquist, & Knight, 2003), and this sentiment continues to be apparent among the soccer players' conscious. However, studies have demonstrated that mothers, more likely than a sports star, are considered role models by adolescent girls (Vesico, Wilde, & Crosswhite, 2005). Physically active mothers are especially important for girls sport participation (Toftegaard-Stokel, Nielsen, Ibsen, & Andersen, 2011). Parents (and not just mothers) play a crucial role in talent development per se (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002).

Also apparent in our research is that a mother's support and interest in sport is a pivotal stimulus for participation, as Yanique and Melissa emphasized. Yanique told the story about her frustrated mother who did not begin playing soccer until she was in her thirties due to gender norms that excluded women from playing sports. Referring to herself and her three siblings, Yanique noted that her mother was "excited to get us into sport". Melissa talked extensively about her mother's lack of opportunities when she grew up, and how that influenced her own abilities and emotional drive to become an elite athlete. "My mom had the pain of growing up when she did and not being able to express herself as an athlete", noted Melissa. "I think she was very envious in a healthy way... which... allowed her to see me as potentially an athlete". This story of frustration became a key motive for Melissa to understand her own participation. Furthermore, the way Melissa was encouraged to practice sport by her mother, to make gender a non-issue, was also a reason why her mother is her role model:

I think she was a great athlete herself, and she never treated me... socially, never treated me either way as a boy or a girl, she just treated me *unisex* in a way, and, however I wanted to go, as far as a sport career, she let me... I think that is very important for development, and I think we place so much emphasis on gender and gender development, and it hurts the girls. Because you are supposed to be feminine and... you are supposed to act a certain way, or, you are not supposed to be very aggressive.

Melissa's story reveals that negotiating gender seemed to be an important part of her becoming an elite female athlete. The ideal construction of femininity and masculinity can seemingly read as mutually exclusive binaries (Connell, 1987, 2002); you are either in or out. To manage this stereotype dynamic, Melissa conveys a third option. By an active *degendering*, Melissa, via the narrative of her mom, makes room for the non-gendered performance

of the unisex position: the cultural performance of soccer. Analytically, when faced with such gender barriers and explicitly reflecting about the issue, it would seem reasonable to believe that Melissa and her teammates would refrain from using the very same binary to make sense of other matters in the sporting context. However, this was not the case.

When reviewing the teams' websites at the time of data collection, only two of the nine professional franchises in the WPS were led by female head coaches. Furthermore, only six of the 17 assistant coaches in the nine WPS franchises were female. While discussing role models, the topic soon turned to coaches and the interviews revealed that two participants preferred *male* coaches, whereas two participants preferred the *best* coach regardless of gender. Wilma simply stated: "I prefer male coaches. Because... he just tells you like it is... Personally, I have never had a female coach, *and I don't want one*". Wilma's words manifest distrust in women as a dichotomous opposition of characteristics to that of men (Connell, 1995). There is neither need nor wish for, in Wilma's eyes, a female coach to comfort and ingratiate herself with professional athletes in a masculine achievement culture. Issues of gender and coaching competency were further expressed by Grace:

Female coaches have not played football at this high level of sport, yet, and I prefer to be coached by someone that has played at this elite level themselves... I guess I demand a lot from a coach, but my technical skills due to great coaching have always been my strength, and I think that is a weakness with many [female] coaches. And the female coaches, they simply don't get the game as the men do, for them it is all about *follow the ball* [stated negatively]. They know the theory in the book, but they are unable to use it once they get on the field. Even more, when they are unable to discuss the tactic that just took place in front of them, then I give up.

Despite a few exceptions, women's soccer is largely organized and led by male staff. Images of males as authorities/coaches reinforce and (re)construct regimes of inequality (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003). This was clearly emphasized by Melissa when she talked about coaching and that "a good coach knows how to get the best out of your players, and the best coaches, like English men's Premier League's Ferguson and Wenger, are first and foremost successful because they know how to *manage people*". Melissa refers here to two renowned male coaches that when she said "manage people", she really meant manage men. It can be argued that female coaches have to negotiate not only male dominated sports cultures, but also the opinions of female athletes. Melissa commented on issues of competency and gender in relation to the glass ceiling that women often face in professional advancement:

Just because you are a different gender, female gender, like... it only exists because people have made it that way. But who you are and what you are capable of is... endless... and again, even TV shows, movies, media, society dealing with sports and... all those things are based, in my opinion, based on the glass ceiling, and that's the way certain people will get attention. As a female, they might mention performance, but it is an afterthought.

Messner (2009) supports Melissa's claim by stating that "informal dynamics create a kind of 'glass ceiling' that prevents most women from moving up" (p. 62). These constraints are particularly salient at collegiate and professional coaching levels. Grace also perceived male coaches in her league to be the ones who "did not succeed in the men's league", and she provided several examples in female sport where female elite athletes were managed by "*second class* coaches". Yanique echoed these sentiments, expressing that the lack of coaching competency in women's sports was a product of the limited social value of women's sports. These comments related to coaches' gender and concerning role models' gender struggles provide an interesting backdrop that illustrates the dynamic relationships between the social value of women's sports, women athletes' preferences for premier male role models at a certain age, and the economic constraints present in women's sports due to the cultural marginalization and lack of sponsorship of women's sports. The emotional support and commitment from their mothers, and a strong belief that athleticism should be any daughter's prerogative, is analyzed as the active negotiation and reflective maneuvering of perceived gender norms and *symbolic gender* relations (Connell, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) in the US soccer leagues. The interviewees believe that these structured gender inequalities are still present and can account for the male domination in contemporary sports. Simultaneously, symbolic gender norms are used to devalue female coaches. Paradoxically, the athletes want to get rid of the glass ceiling and female coaches at the same time. In the flux of gender ambiguities and stereotype dynamics, the interviewees use powerful cultural conceptions of men's and women's capabilities to present a gendered agenda; they want the best for themselves.

## Media Images of Performing Bodies

As noted by many scholars (e.g., Cooky et al., 2013; Lisec & McDonald, 2012; Pedersen, Whisenant, & Schneider, 2003), the media not only often marginalize sportswomen when coverage is given but women's sports coverage in the media (print, broadcast, new/social media, etc.) is not concomitant with the coverage of men's sports. Boyle and Haynes (2009) indicated that the media sport complex is driven by a business relationship where sport has the

potential to draw in huge audiences, and so the media buy sporting events in the market place and promote those sports, events, and stars that they believe will attract the highest viewing figures. This has implications for women's sports, as sport and the mass media are inextricably linked in a symbiotic relationship where gender becomes a significant component (Broch, 2011; Kane, 2013). Female soccer has to battle two structural factors when struggling for media attention as both gender and the sport itself are often marginalized.

Firstly, in the US the "Big Four" dominating male sports (i.e., football, baseball, basketball, and hockey) are often given prominent media attention. With soccer, while there are exceptions (e.g., World Cup of '99) and there are positive signs in terms of spectatorship and participation (Di Lorenzo, 2013; Kelley & Carchia, 2013), the sport is often marginalized by the US media and the present situation in female soccer may serve as an example of this. According to the interviewees, the popularity of female soccer documented in prior research (e.g., Christopherson et al., 2002; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003) has somehow faded away. Melissa, Grace, and Yanique felt that media had little interest in the present league and their achievements. They were concerned about this negative development and speculated why this phenomenon occurs. Yanique argued that media coverage of the WPS seemed to depend on "the city being of European influence or not", and if professional football, basketball, baseball, or hockey had a presence in the cities where the WPS franchises were located. The lack of media visibility of female soccer players diminishes chances for women's professional soccer to grow in the US sport labor market. The North Americans respect an Olympic gold medal; however, Melissa and Grace also argued that *respect* does not provide enough money for daily living.

In the interviews the players also presented several ideas to enhance the popularity of women's soccer. Grace offered solutions to the lack of media coverage and the symbolic dimensions (Connell, 1995, 2002) of traditional femininity. "I think that the best solution would be to get more rich investors in. We need sponsors that have the courage to believe in us and spend money on each player, to simply promote them until they become stars", noted Grace. She added that "You've got to create stars in order to make people follow and become fans of the league. We need to use the more profiled players for what they are worth, make them role models for the next generation. The [franchise] leaders must not just send the prettiest girls - send the profiled ones!" As evident in previous Connellist research (e.g., Messner, 2002; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008), elite athletes' comprehensions of selves do not always correspond with the media's market strategies. Interestingly, in this case, the soccer players uninvited talked about strategies that their team could commit to in order to get the local community to be more involved. They revealed a positive attitude to charity work in their time off - "we got to get the kids involved in soccer" as Wilma repeated.

Secondly, the marginalization of female sport experiences and the invisibility of women's sport accomplishments in the media were dominant themes expressed in all four interviewee narratives. Melissa discussed the effects of media invisibility when she noted, "I have done a lot of great things, and it has been very invisible, and I don't know why, this is a big question, personally, with my therapist, going through all these years, and again as a player". Connell's (2002) theoretical framework suggests that these perceptions can relate to the structure of gender, a structural media-sport dynamic previously analyzed by Messner (2002) that supports "a powerful reaffirmation of masculine privilege" (p. 76). In a Connellist framework masculine privilege should be read as male privilege. The soccer players revealed that to negotiate media visibility was also a gendered negotiation that included aspects of their gendered self-worth. Situated within the sport/media-complex cultural mentality, the athletes interviewed were forced to negotiate their sport accomplishments with a lack of income, earning power, and media visibility in a culture that celebrates certain male sports.

Too often though the presence and power of female athletes is reframed in media through the hegemonic masculine gaze; the female athlete represented as heterosexually appealing and sexually available. Melissa highlighted the pressures of emphasized femininity, stating "it is never about performance first in female sport. It is always about the hot-factor... they might mention performance, but it is an afterthought". In order to foster a wider acceptance of women's sports, Melissa called on the sport media, and society at large, to provide balanced images of female sport where athletic accomplishments are valued. She noted that "society can say 'yes we value, women's sport', it is not that they don't think it is valuable, but they... just don't find it entertaining because they are not used to find it entertaining, do you know what I mean?" Idealistically, Melissa called for recognition of the game of women's soccer on its own terms. "You know sport is what men do, being physical aggressive is what men do, and... I don't know, I don't think people recognize the beauty of the game", noted Melissa. She added that, "I am obviously soccer biased, and... you know... women can be as... aggressive and they can be graceful and play a beautiful game of soccer, like... come together well as a team". Melissa thought that if the media focused more on the beauty and aggressiveness of women's soccer it might be more interesting to watch, and in turn it would generate income, revenues, and a sustainable league.

In Connell's (1995, 2002) terminology, the symbolic display of emphasized femininity and traditional heterosexual attractiveness is valued more than athletic competence and prowess. Participants expressed concerns about the symbolic meanings of femininity conveyed through the media and that their media images were received by audiences as portrayals of conventional feminine beauty instead of competent athletes. The paradox of

balancing earning power associated with images of the female athlete as an attractive and receptive person takes focus away from the appearance of the female athlete as a technically skilled sportsperson and eventually an interest in the female sport practice. The interviewees want the media to see and portray their practice as rightfully aggressive and team oriented, while at the same time appropriately graceful. Women's soccer should not be reduced to an either or binary, it can be both at the same time.

## Transgressing the Boundaries of Compulsory Heterosexuality

The gender dimensions of soccer vary culturally. Some have described the game as a male-appropriate sport due to emphasized aggression and physical contact (Matteo, 1986), while others argue that in the US it is a women's or gender-neutral sport (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003). Markowitz and Hellerman (2003) also added that soccer is special in the US due to the lack of competition with a well-established men's counterpart common in most other nations of the world. Describing soccer in the US is an apparently challenging task, as evidenced by the scholarly conclusion regarding the media coverage at the turn of the century: "The U.S. Women's World Cup team gained popularity through heterosexuality, femininity, a hint of masculinity, and adherence to the notion that America is a land of equality - at least more equality than other nations have" (Christopherson et al., 2002, p. 182). Wilma stated without hesitation that soccer in the US is a more *girlish* sport compared to European countries where soccer was gender coded as *boyish*. "There are millions of girls out there", noted Wilma. "From little girls, to older girls, to us, there are millions that play soccer. I think women's soccer is girlish in the US". She contrasted the feminine gender identity of soccer in the US with American football, which she argued was "totally the men's sport". In Wilma's view the traditional gender coding of soccer as a masculine activity is challenged by the large number of girls and women playing soccer in the US.

The relevance of participation numbers, as well as whether the number of women is a majority or minority of active players in a sport, also corresponds with what seems to determine if particular sports are understood to be female or male appropriate sports elsewhere (Broch, 2012). The same can be said about the increased coverage provided by the media to sportswomen who participate in appropriate sports and "appear feminine, upholding traditional feminine ideologies regarding female athletic participation" (Burch, Eagleman, & Pedersen, 2012, p. 154). Regarding the present study, Grace was of the opinion that some still consider soccer a masculine sport, where female participants are still coded as "tomboys". The tomboy label has been explored as a signifier of female athletes who exhibited gender traits traditionally coded as masculine, such as strength, power, and muscu-

larity (Scraton et al., 1999). This was also the case in the empirical sample explored in the current study. Scraton and colleagues concluded that self-identifying as tomboys reinforces and reproduces, rather than challenges, the power relations and binary oppositions of masculine/feminine and men's sports/women's sports. This also holds true in a Connellist (1987, 1995, 2002) analysis where the tomboy gender construction can exemplify the reconstruction of dominant *symbolic relations* of gender. Marked as tomboys, female soccer players may classify themselves in an intermediate state of gender practice. The category of tomboy deals with gender category transgression by allowing another way of classifying the in-between.

Female elite athletes easily become a target for the media's interest and questioning of sexuality if those athletes transgress what is considered gender appropriate. Once female athletes adopt physical and social traits that are traditionally associated with heterosexual sport masculinity, their sexual orientations can be challenged. In the media this might also result in increased invisibility. The athletes themselves felt that this was a constant struggle and/or fight with society and the media. Yanique explained that there are always rumors about players' sexual orientations, and Grace felt that the focus on her as a mother underlined her heterosexual orientation: "I am known to be an aggressive player, so I guess it helps to focus on my role as a mother and wife". In other words, her aggressiveness is more easily accepted if the female athlete is conventionally "pretty" or can interlink with other conceptions of femininity, such as being a mother. The athletes were aware that the more they blurred the boundaries of gender, the more their sexual orientations were discussed. Due to gender always being relational, the patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradictions from some patterns of femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and the interviews gave several examples of the soccer players' experiences of transgression of these patterned boundaries.

In particular, Melissa expanded on media interest in player sexual orientations in the 1999 US women's national team, as this was the heyday of media attention relative to women's soccer. "So many questions were about sexuality, and that kind of thing, and they were completely missing the point", Melissa noted. She added that such interest and focus by the sports media "was like another way... for them to say... we respect you guys because we are here and asking you questions and we are reporting on you... but in fact, the substance of what they were asking had nothing to do with how talented, how great we were". Melissa then stated that "maybe every now and then" the media would focus on "the history that we were making, but, they had all these other questions that seemed to *sabotage* the greatness of who we were and what our team was accomplishing". The media's focus on sexual orientation sabotages, or tempers, the transformative power of the narrative, mitigating the impact of female sport achievements (e.g.,



Creedon, 1998; Duncan, 1990; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008). Hence, Melissa's comments can be understood through Connell's (2002) gender theory lens, where her frustrations result from the inequalities inherent in the overall gender order within the sport/media-complex.

In her explanation pertaining to emphasized femininity, Melissa argued strongly for the imaging of female soccer players as elite athletes worthy of sponsoring due to their abilities, instead of on their bodies as sexualized commodities. The focus on their sexuality was perceived by participants as a hindrance to the acceptance of female soccer players, and as a way to control their power as positive female role models. As previously argued, making women's sports attractive means that female athletes must be read as attractive heterosexuals (e.g., Christopherson et al., 2002; Cox & Thompson, 2000; Hargreaves, 2000). If this does not happen, it is hard to find support for women's teams (cf. Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003), as these four WPS players proclaimed. Although we should be careful in applying models of femininity and masculinity in this analysis, Connell's (1987, 2002) notion of emphasized femininity crystalizes the problem explored above. Emphasized heterosexual femininity becomes a symbolic standard that the female athletes apply to negotiate with as well as against in the gendered sport-media nexus. In a flux of gendered meaning, stereotypical notions of gender become a means to proclaim the value of women's soccer, as well as a symbolic barrier with very real economic and emotional expenses.

Both male and female elite sports are supposed to be beautiful *and* highly aggressive competitions (Archetti, 1999; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008). As Melissa said with a sigh, "I mean, I think sex sells for both genders". She added, "I am not an idiot... Wayne Rooney doesn't get probably some of the sponsorships that Christian Ronaldo does... because of how, you know... gorgeous Ronaldo is, but Wayne Rooney definitely does not miss out of any attention because of his performance". Have Melissa and the researchers constructed false dichotomies? Arguably, Melissa perceived these dichotomies as a means to portray her agenda, a means to promote women's soccer as a female sisterhood perhaps, not complex female identities. Women breaking barriers in general and the females interviewed here may serve as an exemplification of how Connell's (1987, 1995, 2002) gender order is not only manifested through a model analysis, but that arguing with patriarchy is also an active means to portray a gendered agenda.

## Kicking Around Gender

The three interconnected themes (i.e., participants' perceptions of role models and their socialization as soccer players; media images and the invisibility

of the female athlete; and sexualization of elite female bodies and transgressions of compulsory heterosexuality boundaries) revealed in this study need further explanation. In a context where the female soccer players reflect on their own subordination and invisibility, male superstars are idolized, and male/masculine skills and characteristics are preferred within a system of binaries which only privileges a few good men. This binary is also used by the female soccer players to promote their agenda of respect, recognition, and worthiness of their performances. To achieve this agenda the interviewees constructed their subordination as gendered. Such a paradox requires some elaboration.

The interviewees saw themselves as proper role models for a sport that, in their opinion, struggles to overcome gendered barriers of symbolic objectification by media and the power and production relations within the male dominated sport field. However, their reasoning and devaluing of selves, female coaches and their coaching style symbolically reproduce the very same gender binary and order they are struggling against. In light of Connell's (1987, 1995, 2002) theory, this is the gender order in the sport field where a specific kind of hegemonic masculinity is considered to bare the symbolic characteristic of success: The straightforward male that successfully manages male players. To support and comply with this symbolic order is simultaneously to reproduce a structure of gender relations that devalue other masculinities and all femininities. Through the complex relations of interlocking gender dynamics, the interviewees are analytically perceived to devalue themselves when valuing the male and masculine within a sport/media-complex where market value equals personal value.

Except when references are made to beautiful and sexy media objects, the interviewees promoted their sport at the expense of individual variation, as well as through the promotion of female soccer players as a group. This is also the case for their evaluation of male and female coaches. Stereotypical notions of gender color their presentation and even mask significant and problematic issues of what many feminists consider valuable in sport and society. The dichotomies should not be read as false, maybe not even true, but as present structural binaries that are negotiated, challenged, and reproduced in the symbolic dynamics of a particular sport gender order that values the hegemonic masculine above all. The massive entrance of female athletes into sports certainly challenges a previous male hegemony, but the hegemonic masculine value system is symbolically reproduced through the stereotypic dynamic that saturates the context.

## Conclusion

The empirical analysis illustrates the constant negotiating of gender among the four female soccer players interviewed in this investigation. In

agreement with Hargreaves (1994) we note that the development of women's sports is riddled with complexities and contradictions. The athletes' perceptions of role models, gender socialization as athletes, and the presence of gender equality in coaching and leadership in US women's soccer demonstrates the presence of gender as a powerful structure in athletes' everyday lives. The importance of their mother as a sporting role model and support person not only encouraged them to be physically active (Toftgaard-Stockel et al., 2011), but also provided important female inspiration. The interviewees revealed a preference for male coaches, while at the same time they expressed frustration when faced with weak acceptance and wanting to promote female soccer. Despite frustrations and preferences, at the same time there appeared to be a resigned acceptance of the status quo. "Americans really do care about sports, and even if you are female, they care about sports", noted Grace. The Olympic gold medallist continued, "It doesn't mean that you'll get as much as your male counterpart, but you'll get something... so it is an opportunity we have". Overall, the study participants' system of values is situated and induced by gendered power structures as noted above through Connell's (1987, 1995, 2002) theoretical framework.

The purpose of this study was not to produce generalizable facts to argue whether the athletes' perceptions of soccer are right or wrong. Instead, the participants' narratives offer valuable insights into the gender dynamics perceived by the interviewees, which are analyzed using previous research on how gender is a significant component in sports and in the US women's soccer leagues. Scholars are encouraged to undertake similar research, investigating subjective experiences and feelings instead of objectifying large samples of generalizable data and using a critical discourse approach that reduces lives to manifestations of macro-structures. When slightly shifting the perspective, putting the study's subjects in the driver's seat, complexities in the tug-of-gender-wars may be better revealed and understood from a slightly different angle. The research in the current study highlights an interesting paradox of elite female athletes de-gendering themselves to increase their legitimacy as elite athletes, while at the same time devaluing the abilities of female coaches because they are female. This seemingly contradictory stance is certainly worth further analysis. Future research on gender norms in coaching may be particularly valuable to better understand the ways women can positively alter traditional sport spaces, gain greater visibility, and receive the presence of elite female athletes and coaches. The conclusion of the current study - that women's professional soccer will continue to struggle in the US - is slightly dimmer than prior research. However, unfortunately, the cultural sport context and the gendered stereotype dynamics therein make it difficult to proclaim that the practice of soccer will be kicked forward.

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